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DE RUEHKA #6304/01 2891059
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2176
INFO RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 8760
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 9410
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1321
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 006304

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/16/2011

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM BG

SUBJECT: SECURITY TOPS LIST OF PRE-ELECTION CONCERNS IN CHITTAGONG REGION

Classified By: CDA a.i. Geeta Pasi, reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Observers in the Chittagong area, where high levels of violence and fraud are expected in the upcoming election, see security as their biggest concern. Like other parts of Bangladesh partially stabilized by the deployment of the notoriously aggressive Rapid Action Battalion, they fear the beginning of the caretaker government in late October could trigger a new round of violence and chaos. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) In September, POLOFF visited Chittagong and three nearby towns where elections were closely contested or fraught with violence in 2001. All are considered by international and local NGOs to be "areas of concern" in the upcoming parliamentary campaign. Satkania and Chandanaish are approximately 20 kilometers south of Chittagong city, while Fatikchari is 25 kilometers north of Chittagong and borders on the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Shatkania: The "Oli Factor"

¶3. (C) Satkania-Chandanaish is the home constituency of ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP MP Oli Ahmed, who in mid-2006 publicly charged his party's leadership with condoning rampant corruption in its ranks and is now threatening to start his own breakaway party. A 1971 war hero and respected confidant of the BNP founder, the late General Zia, Ahmed is the most senior BNP leader to challenge his party's leadership. In meetings with U.S. and other Western diplomats, Ahmed disparages BNP heir apparent Tarique Rahman as arrogant and immature. Ahmed narrowly defeated his Awami League (AL) rival in 2001. The other local constituency was represented by Ahmed from 1996 to 2001 but is now held by Jamaat-a-Islami (JI) MP Shajahan Chowdhury.

¶4. (C) Local BNP leader Mahmudul Islam told us that if Ahmed would win easily if he ran as an independent in both constituencies, and that Ahmed and his supporters are already strategizing with the AL to ensure that the AL did not run candidates against him. Islam claimed that if Ahmed decided to run as a "spoiler" in other constituencies in Chittagong division, he could tilt several races in favor of the AL.

¶5. (C) Both BNP and AL leaders complained about the security environment, claiming that the area is under the control of gangs loyal to the Jamaat-a-Islami MP Ziaul Habib Ahsan. A local representative of the Bangladeshi Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR) expressed concern that the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), widely believed to engage in extrajudicial "cross-fire" killings, would be weakened once the caretaker government takes power and that crime and violence would return to levels not seen since the deployment of the RAB.

Fatikchari: A Former "Killing Zone"

¶16. (SBU) Fatikchari is one of only two constituencies held by the AL in Chittagong division. The current MP, Rafiqul Anwar (widely known as "Golden Rafiq" because of his alleged gold smuggling), was re-elected in 2001. According to the National Democratic Institute (NDI), this constituency had the highest number of "captured" polling centers in the country in 2001. Fourteen polling stations, it said, had suspiciously high turnouts for Rafiq. In addition, Fatikchari had one of the highest crime rates in the country during the AL government from 1996 to 2001.

¶17. (C) Local journalists told us Fatikchari was known as a "killing zone" until 2005, when the Rapid Action Battalion pushed criminal gangs into the neighboring Chittagong Hill Tracts. Several of these gangs were allegedly directed by Rafiq and drew members from the AL's student wing. Mirza Mohammad Akbar, a local BNP leader, said that local AL leaders have threatened that "when the caretaker government takes over, we'll get revenge." A local doctor affirmed security is the top issue. "Yes, people are upset about no electricity, high prices for commodities, but when they lose power, they can now go outside without being shot, and they can walk to the market to buy those expensive commodities without being robbed. That is what they care about the most."

¶19. (C) Local BNP activists told us that to win the Fatikchari seat back from the AL, S.Q. Chowdhury, a Chittagong heavyweight and key advisor to PM Zia, might take up the BNP standard. Chowdhury, who currently represents a neighboring constituency, has told us that he reluctant to do this, but

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is being pressured by party leaders. Zahidul Karim Kochi, a local journalist and BNP sympathizer, said that if Chowdhury runs, "the election could get violent" since Chowdhury also has armed followers he could deploy against Rafiq's "brigades."

¶110. (C) COMMENT. Shatkania and Fatikchari provide a snapshot of the rough and tumble world of Bangladeshi politics, especially outside the big cities. Elections there often boil down to which candidate, regardless of party, can muster the most thugs and money.

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